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Author(s): Häyhtiö, Tapio; Rinne, Jarmo  
Title: Introduction: Seeking the Citizenry on the Internet – Emerging virtual creativity  
Main work: Net working/Networking: citizen initiated Internet politics  
Editor(s): Häyhtiö, Tapio; Rinne, Jarmo  
Year: 2008  
Pages: 11-38  
Publisher: Tampere University Press  
Discipline: Media and communications  
Item Type: Article in Compiled Work  
Language: en  
URN: URN:NBN:fi:uta-201303191064

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## ***Introduction: Seeking the citizenry on the Internet – Emerging virtual creativity***

### THE CHANGING SCOPE OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Political participation is undergoing a profound change throughout the world. Development hints that politics seems to pervade from institutions to people's daily living, from nation-state to global and local level. Politics has disembedded from structural frameworks and moved to a networked society facilitated by computer-mediated communication (CMC). As a result of this evolution, the new media is taking more and more visible role regarding to political communication and activity. The Internet is viewed as a tool, channel and forum enabling citizens to make an impact on social, cultural and political change. In the process, civic empowerment through the Internet emerges in people's everyday lives. The Internet is a powerful medium for gathering coalitions and organising mobilisations of all kinds. It also transforms political styles and types of activities.

Traditionally, we have been told, by politicians as well as political scientists, politics is an instrument for distributing good (and bad) in communities. The scope of politics is in finding solutions and resolving the conflicting views within communities, allocating values with legitimate authority, organising the changes and directions of communal life. Politics is, thus, governing and an organised attempt to bring order in a pluralistic chaos. (See for instance Arendt 1958; Beetham 1991; Keane 1998.)

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1. Both authors have contributed equally to this article.

Along with the movement of politics to a networked society, there are traces of a new orientation in political science research; the shift of studies is increasingly taking into account the activity by the people instead of activity for the people. This change has also had a profound effect on the notion of citizenship. In previous decades political citizenship was, in principal, reduced to the right to vote in elections. Participation through voting had been regarded as a sufficient condition for democratic governance in some influential commentaries (for instance Downs 1957). However, electoral participation has decreased all around the world in liberal democracies (for the definition, see Held 1997, 81; Heywood 2004, 225-227) and political culture is taking steps along the path towards a more reciprocal and interactive participation process. A revised paradigm encompassing political citizenship along with the notion that people should “*have a voice during electoral periods, too*”, has been introduced by many political scientists in various models. Versions of participatory democracy models have been developed to generate a greater involvement and say in decisions concerning the position of citizenry and the future shape of communal life. At the same time, along with this ongoing participatory evolution citizens’ own activism to initiate spontaneous/voluntary civic activity groups and get involved in public matters and discussions has also increased. This self-made *do-it-yourself*-activity takes a contrary stand to the earlier top-down electoral mode of democracy. The forms and forums along with the concept of political activity and participation are changing, and it is causing controversial implications – actionist and administrative consequences. Citizens’ activism in forming groups to express opinions and attitudes is part of the process linked to evolutionary democratic change.

The prevailing form of political rule in liberal democracies is the representative model, in which people have the right to elect political rulers to make public decisions for them. The very idea of representation therefore recognises the dilemma between the government and the governed. The formal procedure of selecting the representatives is through periodical elections. Thus, the representation suggests that an individual, or group, can stand for a larger group of likeminded people (Heywood 2004, 233) mirroring their ideas, values, and opinions in political decision-making. However, the representative model

of democratic participation has been a target of serious criticism. It has been criticised as not being a microcosm of society at all. To put it simply, according to critics representatives are not representing all segments of societal groupings in proportion to their size; elected politicians tend not to resemble the population in terms of schooling, social class, professional status etc. (ibid., 233). It has also been pointed out, that electoral participation imply but a limited periodical involvement in political life for ordinary people during the campaigns and through voting. Intermediate times between elections are mute in terms of civic involvement. A focal point should be, whether this amount of participation is enough in terms of *democratic* governance to be thoroughly democratic and accountable? People are choosing between candidates in elections, not necessarily (and in fact hardly ever) between different policies. Thus, in elections the selection of the personnel is in focus, not the future lines of political action. In practise, the idea of Dahlian *procedural democracy* in which *demos* should have an enlightened understanding of political issues to be able to participate effectively (Dahl 1997, 111-112), is seldom present in campaign rallies. The rhetoric of candidates is opaque and obscure and tends to avoid clear-cut political pledges or policy-linings.

So, what do we have to offer instead of electoral democracy, then? In recent decades we have witnessed the emergence of civic empowerment through the Internet. The varieties of political activity and participation have stretched beyond the reach of traditional party and association-oriented politics. This development is by no means accidental, rather it is synchronized coincidence. Instead of involving into traditional politics, political activity and commitment is being replaced with individually oriented working sketches of the 'new politics', which creates new kinds of unequalled political communities from below, which acknowledge no borders of any kind. The span of cyber-activism has expanded into the fields of e-democracy, citizens' panel, user-generated communication, information warfare, security and e-crimes. The politics of the Internet is a politics of many actors, many levels, and actions of a heterogeneous multitude.

Linked to the political transformation two rather different approaches to political citizenship and participation have entered the stage in western liberal democracies. The discussions concerning civic

participation can be labelled either as *administrational* or *actionist* approaches. The first mentioned aims to create and rationalise the practices of participation from above (e.g. the planning of land use and urban construction and good governance practices). Various attempts to increase citizens' participation in the political decision-making processes have been launched by modern democratic governments. The main challenge in such efforts is to establish influential and empowering mechanisms for the expression of a separate judgement" by interested people with respect to their elected representatives. The basic problem of these efforts are crystallised in the contrast existing between the notions of "representative" and "participatory" democracy. Activities (actions) in politics are in many senses brought about by the sensitive balance of mobilising from above and participating from below. The crucial question then is: *How much immediate participation by citizens to influence the political/public matters should there be?* (See Molinari; Lehtonen; Calenda & Meijer and Vromen in this volume).

The second approach takes an opposite stand, when compared to the earlier approach. The focus in this second approach is to self-initiate alternative meanings and practices from below. To do so, active people are creating interpretative frames to understand and portray their own political activities. Through and within such frames actors are constantly and interactively reflecting on a mixture of different motivational stimuli, that consist of actors' understanding regarding their own activities; interpretations of their aims and relevant means to achieve their goals; and lessons learned from past action in relation to future expectations. Thus, self-initiated frames are used to make sense of new opportunities and challenges as they arise (see Vromen; Gillan; Häyhtiö & Rinne; Rättälä and Baringhorst in this volume). The distinction between the actionists and the administrative approaches is explicit. In the administrative approach public authorities are involving citizens in decision-making, but contrary to this the citizens in the actionist approach are active somewhere other than in the traditional sphere of institutionally organised participation.

So, the contemporary milieu of political action and participation has fractured into a diverse, complex multi-spatial network in which several controversial motivational drives; re-scaled political priorities; manners and styles of making an impact are emerging. In this political

jungle the value of individualism and post-materialism (see Inglehart 1997, 35) are hailed, and the significance and sensibility of political participation springs not only from the impact and consequences of the action but also from the participative action itself. This individualised political empowerment could potentially cause the renaissance of personalised politicisation and might be the cure for the perceived political apathy troubling modern societies. People claim to win back their authenticity and autonomy through the process of individualisation's privilege of becoming "who one really is" and autonomy as the privilege to "be one's own person". The purpose in this is to enable people to use their own talents to bridge the gap between what they are and what they want to be.

The indubitable danger in such understanding emphasising the importance of individualism, is that society is seen merely as a matrix of atomistic free agents moving from one position or coalition to another. To avoid the lurking risk of extreme individualism, it is vital to bear in mind that the emancipation of individuals and collectives as well, comes from what they are enabled, or feel to able, to do reflexively for themselves and (or) for their societies. The major incentive in any political activities is to make an impact on public issues. The motivation explaining people's postmaterial engagement may be a bit different from the motives behind electoral participation. Involvement and activity in general, in individualised politics is not based on ideological differences nor on the traditional attachment to a certain class, or group membership. Rather is it motivated by the self-narrated and subjectively felt problems of everyday life that generate different personal political homes for each actor, and are motivated by personal interests and aims. This view is in concert with the old Aristotelian idea of politics, in which people as social beings produce a good life for a community to be able to live a good life.

#### FROM ONE-WAY MASS MEDIA TO DIGITAL NETWORKS

When analysing the relationship of political participation to publicness in more detail, it is quite easily noticeable that since the 1980's "old democracy", public spheres have gone through significant expansions

and transformations, which have affected the culture of political participation. The exponential growth of commercial media and digital communication and the acceleration of globalisation have had great influences on the change. (Keane 2000, Kellner 2000.) Modernised societies have become media societies in which new interactive media and communication modes (the Internet, mobile phones, Digital-TV) extend the media landscape of traditional one-way mass media (newspapers, radio, TV). People increasingly spend their time using the media, and perceive their localised environment through the media and product media contents alone (see Calenda & Meijer; Lehtonen and Mosca in this volume).

The multiplicity of networked spaces of communication has broken down mass media's hegemonic position in mediating political publicness (see Baringhorst; Häyhtiö & Rinne in this volume). The practices of political public life have also been disentangled efficiently from public institutions and state territories by the fracturing networks. A useful heuristic tool for analysing the political features of public spheres and fluid media environments – which suits the Internet well – comes from civil society researcher John Keane. He divides publicness into three different categories of spheres: *micro-, meso- and macro-public spheres*, which practically permeate each other. Political micro-spheres emerge, when people encounter each other and dispute about controversial issues. A micro-public sphere is a space, generated between groups of civil society as well as single individuals, where public deliberation is conducted, opposing views confront each other and existing standpoints and interpretations are challenged by bringing forth alternative stances in the political playground. In Keane's model the notion of a meso-public sphere resembles traditional mass media which frame spaces of public debate for millions of potential spectators, listeners and readers mainly in nation-states. The agenda of a meso-sphere is filtered and edited, which means that it is not formulated in horizontal civic communications. The concept of a macro-public sphere refers to a globalised field of publicness, in which the most important actors are transnational media companies. (Keane 2000; Häyhtiö & Rinne 2007.)

When following Keane's line of thinking, we can understand how Internet publicness has become a tool, channel and resource for

political influence. The accessibility of www browsers in the 1990's created a setting for the notion of *Web 1.0* that refers to easy-to-use computer-mediated communication (CMC). The expanding growth in the capacity of computing devices, software and data transfer led to the final breakthrough of the Internet and multiplied the number of users. The Internet became a graphic environment in which people can consume, publish content freely, create sites and communities, seek linked information, "surf" from one place to another, entertain themselves, conduct politics and meet people. (Walch 1999, 39-49; Chadwick 2006, 45-47.) In CMC the most significant political feature is *de-medialization*, which refers to the fracturing mediator role of mass media and the emergence of horizontal communication. As the Internet expanded, new styles of communication activism arose, because it was impossible to control them and anybody could try to bring matters to public discussion. (Walch 1999, 67-75.) Web 1.0 styles of communication enable bi-directional change of information between different actors in political scenery. It is well suited for various organisations' purposes to distribute their strategies, aims and modes of action and launch interactive discussions among those related to these activities (see Mosca; Vromen; Gillan; Molinari; Paltemaa, Lapalainen and Baringhorst in this volume)

Studies considering citizen initiated politics have shown a growing interest in the paradigm shift in the political use of the Internet – labelled as a politics of *Web 2.0*. The notion of Web 2.0 encompasses sites based on user-generated content, networking and sharing. (Wyld 2007; Lehtonen; Jordan; Häyhtiö & Rinne; Hintikka and Rättilä in this volume.) Today, the services and applications offered by the Internet are largely commercial but this has not hindered spontaneous political civic activity in emerging onto the platforms of social media. In fact, it is understood that Web 2.0 sites in general are transforming the Internet into a mode of space where users do not simply discuss but do things together (O'Reilly 2005). It presents an Internet where contents are created and shaped by networking individuals. (Wyld 2007, 43-44; Chadwick 2006, 8.) In user-generated content production individuals themselves control creation processes by developing, classifying, architecting or evaluating Web content. Indeed, Web 2.0 sites can be defined as peer-to-peer media, in which collectivities



consist of the choices of individuals to connect to platforms and to act voluntarily in them. (O'Reilly 2005.) Web communities can also manifest sources of collective political activity when swarming and meshworking individuals visit interesting websites and hubs to solve problems or attain shared aims or orientations. The multitude of individuals may grow into a politically effective force by uniting. By meshworking the swarming effect turns the plurality into unity (cf. Osterweil 2004, 504; see Häyhtiö & Rinne in this volume.)

Through the Internet actors may disseminate their aims and agenda horizontally, from peer to peer, by opening new public places within the complex structure of overlapping public spheres *micro-, meso- and macro-public* spheres, which form according to John Keane (2000, 77-78): "...a[c]omplex mosaic of differently sized, overlapping and interconnected public spheres." In addition, the employment of CMC offers multiple layers of spatial *asynchronous* contexts and opportunities to mobilise and advocate political pursuits. Publishing and sharing self-made media content horizontally through the Net is a process in which media outputs are received and conceived by their audiences in discursive and interactive manners. In this context any issue may take on political relevance. The meanings of these outputs are formed through communicative practises of sharing and delivering self-created material and information. Meaning-making is open-ended; even loose talk in which politics can materialise in the context of discursive interaction, when the new ways of framing and perceiving social/political issues, and new formulations of strategies are formed (cf. Dahlgren 2006, 279). The processes can be reciprocal, mutual attempts or launched even by a single active individual. It is possible to define issues as political, in other words politicise chosen topics, by denaturalising the conventional perceptions or through ironic and sardonic approaches. (Häyhtiö & Rinne 2009.)

Self-initiated and self-assertive production of de-medialised public arenas and communicating within its' boundaries means circulating unedited and unfiltered communication. It can be done practically by anyone who wants to intervene to publicly pursue whatever aims they wish. (Walch 1999, 67-71.) The power to start public discussions or debates is, at least partly, removed from the hands of the traditional mass media (Chadwick 2006, 137-138). It has proved to be impossible

to control civic discussion on the Net, communication just occurs on the Internet. Communicating and news making have also moved in a more interactive direction; they have evolved into truly bi-directional communication. Mass media keenly follows the on-line discussions and is picking up interesting topics from the Net for inclusion in the news. (Bennett 2003, 20; 2004, 141.) Being on the pulse of themes within micro-public spheres has become a vital part of media-reality and media criticism.

#### CIVIC EMPOWERMENT: IN BETWEEN ADMINISTRATIONAL E-DEMOCRACY AND ACTIONISM

Using the Internet seems to be a very promising tool in overcoming traditional apathetic political involvement, and empowering commitment to political issues. Both institutional and civil societal actors and even single individuals have noticed that the Internet and other CMC – related technical applications have inherently politically facilitating features.

The practices of new institutional-related public involvement have their roots in two different sources, which are New Public Management (NPM) reforms and forms of political participation theory. In a peculiar manner they have been converted into innovations of public involvement. During recent decades various modernisation reforms have been carried out at different levels and in different fields of public administration in OECD countries. In addition to many other functions public administration reforms have striven to connect citizens more effectively to the decision-making processes. Citizens are considered as subjects with needs and wishes that have to be met in order to produce good, efficient, governance. This is the reason why representative government is supplemented by a range of devices for public hearing and consultation to ensure the direct representation of citizen's views. (See Pollitt & Bouckaert 2004.)

The implementation of NPM strategies has led to the emergence of new practices and theories of political governance (Pierre 2000, 1-3; Hirst 2000, 18; Bingham et al. 2005, 549). One mode of political governance is public involvement culture, which aims to construct and

rationalise the practices of civic participation from above (see Häyhtiö & Keskinen 2005; Bingham et al. 2005; Bang 2003). The culture of public involvement is a model of new steering, inclusive political communication, which invites lay people to exercise civic influence in new access points and to partake in a systemic decision-making process (Bang 2003; see also Molinari and Lehtonen in this volume).

In addition to NPM reforms, the culture of public involvement has been influenced by the fact that the distance between political parties and citizens is widening. To answer this problem the ideas given by participatory democracy theory, deliberative democracy theory and most recently e-democracy have been set up because they stress the importance of citizen participation in public deliberation and decision-making (Bingham et al. 2005; Häyhtiö & Keskinen 2005; Dahlberg 2001). These models of participation aspire to political deliberation, in which people are motivated to deliberate in a civil and reasonable manner. Theories emphasise the distribution of information and knowledge as a material used by public in order to form arguments or to support their political opinions so that confidence among citizens increases. A democratic community is therefore to be founded on solidarity and intellectual deliberation and effective cooperation. The admission of legitimacy emerges from reasonable, logical and knowledgeable arguments that are approved by a majority (Häyhtiö & Keskinen 2005, 430)

The ongoing discussion of political alienation is an expression of concern about the unpopularity of political participation. The reigning political elite has recognised the need for the formation of new media for deliberation and forums of participation to bring about a more justified and legitimate form of governance. The aim and the promise of various local, regional, national, EU and global participatory projects and initiatives consist of closer bonds between public officials, politicians and citizens. The purpose is to create and introduce such procedures within the political governance system that strengthen the legitimacy and accountability of political decision-making. (Coleman & Gørze 2001; Macintosh et al. 2002; Malina 2003; Tsagarousianou 1999; Schulman et al. 2003; Schlosberg et al. 2007.) Amongst these new channels to empower are digital networks, especially the Internet. They offer new methods of democratic participation (see Molinari;

Lehtonen; Paltemaa and Lappalainen in this volume). Most of the experimental public involvement e-projects utilise fairly similar infrastructures of CMC, notably various Internet applications. In general, the electronic democracy discourse is marked by two grand promises: the citizen's free access to public information and open discursive deliberation on the electronic Net (Tsagarousianou 1999).

The characteristic feature of the new *public involvement culture* is that it is giving voice to the citizens in such matters that fit into the context of representative political governance. The representative bodies, or civil servants, set the agenda. The citizens themselves do not set the agenda (see Macintosh et al. 2002; Malina 2003; Tsagarousianou 1999; Schulman et al. 2003; Schlosberg et al. 2007; Wiklund 2005; Albrecht 2006). Thus, active civil discussion is about matters, which are considered suitable (and usually they are rather harmless or insignificant) (Blaug 2002; Lappalainen in this volume; Häyhtiö & Keskinen 2005). Nevertheless, despite the fact that the topics of desired civil discussion are fixed, the very tendency to seek more legitimacy by allowing the citizens to participate in governance, tells of the transformation of the political culture. Those in power recognise the need to find out the attitudes and opinions of people at intermediate times between elections. (See Bang & Dyrberg 2003).

However, it must be acknowledged that several aspects of participatory, deliberative e-democracy theory materialise in many public involvement projects. People participate in the deliberations as equal citizens: the participants could be considered equal speakers and performers in relation to one another. Electronic deliberations – with the background information provided – could be considered as processes of political reasoning and argumentation, and the deliberations are free and public. Presentations are not generally hindered or restricted by any authority and they are all public, (cf. Dahlberg 2001a; 2001b), although, it has to be acknowledged that many discussion services are premoderated. Participation is voluntary and its aim is to influence politics. Nevertheless, people do not actually have a direct opportunity to contribute to policymaking. However, the explicit aim of the public involvement website forums is to promote democracy and the citizens' opportunities to participate in politics. The forums therefore seem to seek a kind of consensual politics by means of argumentative delibera-

tion. The aim of public deliberation is to legitimate future policies. In the forums, participation is reciprocal. This gives the participants an opportunity to justify their arguments and to assess the arguments delivered by others.

When comparing badly manifested civic empowerment of administrative e-democracy to actionist discourse of Internet politics, we may more profoundly understand the relation of the Internet to citizen initiated politics. For example, Internet research has concretely shown how new civic movements have adopted the logic of computer-mediated communication, which enables nearly unlimited freedom to produce citizen-oriented contents on the network. These digital contents highlight political struggles arising from citizens' own experiences, which can as well be local, national, or global. (Meikle 2002; McCaughey & Ayers 2003; Donk et al 2004; see also Lehtonen and Lappalainen in this volume). Variations in net-politics can manifest contents, methods of action and aims of whatever are the manifold civic actions, in which political stand-taking happens open-mindedly. Citizen initiated net-politicking is already considered as a basic style for the actors of civil society (cf. Calenda & Meijer and Lappalainen in this volume). Net-activity is incredibly capable of influencing the self-empowerment of various political groupings. In a society of interactive media, do-it-yourself civic activity is much easier than before.

In the present reflexive and global world individuals are in a position of constant judging. They are making choices and commitments, planning, and trying to tune in their preferences regarding the way they hope to conduct their own everyday lives. The identities of these individualised atomistic actors are constructed through complex sets of discursive interactions between the individual and the surrounding reality. In discursive interactions individuals may face risks, fears, threats, conflicts, injustices, uncertainties. (Beck 1995; see also Holzer & Sørensen 2001, 3-6; Bennett 2004, 126-127.) Reflexive politics emerges, when people are trying or wanting to take care of and handle responsibly the problems which occur in everyday life at the level of individual action (Micheletti 2003, 33). Thus public political activities become something more than mere mean, or instrumental action being pursued incrementally to achieve some ends. They are transformed into expressive performative activities, through which political actors

may represent involvement, engagement, social and political references, belonging, and personal value commitments. (Dahlgren 2005, 155; McDonald 2006, 33; Häyhtiö & Rinne 2007.)

CMC enables digital *micro*-politics that fosters the new ideas and modes of action along with the “snowball-effect” that can, during a timely course of action, permeate into *meso*-, or even *macro*-political publicness. The asynchronous temporal dimension is then fortified when people decide to join the original online campaign after noticing it from some other media. Hence, the Internet is to be considered as a *locus*, channel, and to some extent even a temporal space for political and communicative action, participation, and mobilisation. (Meikle 2002; Donk et al. 2004; della Porta & Mosca 2005; Garrett 2006; Häyhtiö & Rinne in this volume.) Various uses of the Internet facilitate different civic networks and organisations to introduce their aims and strategies, and to outreach target groups and members of the public. In addition, they may also more efficiently run the core tasks of campaigning projects, such as communicating with supporters, coordinating events in the field, organising crowds in fast-breaking situations, and reacting quickly to breaking news, and gain publicity for their issue (Mosca; Gillan and Baringhorst in this volume). The empowering potentiality of the Internet is so impressive, that hardly any serious political actor (or “wannabe” actor) could overlook its’ facilitating features (Chadwick 2006). The technical development of the Internet and the plural forms of communication empower activity by opening a radically individualised environment, where personal concerns may be politicised.

#### REFLEXIVE CITIZENS AS GATEKEEPERS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Reflexivity expands the notion of politics to deal with self-initiated, individual, and subjective choices, which have an effect on the emergence of new types of political involvement, participation, and activities. Reflexivity means an active interaction between an individual and the surrounding world. It is taking responsibility for the subjective self-construction as an actor (see McDonald 2006, 14), and thus it is activity by the people instead of waiting for something to be done

by the government. A shift towards reflexive politics means a greater involvement and say in matters that are subjectively chosen to be important. The altering of the scope regarding political mobilisation, activity, and participation is contradicting traditional views of political activities. The transformation has controversial implications in respect of civic involvement and engagement; the changing of the paradigm towards a more individualised participation in which people are forming constantly changing representational multitudes through action (ibid., 34). Being part of or belonging to such multitudes offers an important insight into how people assess their self-identification, which is a primordial element of a complex structuring of identity and a self-defined understanding of “who am I?”. The notion of reflexivity, as we understood it, resonates seamlessly with the personal identity formation and individualised political activity, in which the acting subject is intertwined in many personal passing projects that contribute to the subjective self-image of the agent. Civic involvement, defining a self as a stakeholder of public or common issue, is thus embedded in people’s everyday lives (see Reimer 1999, 25-26), and that conducts the citizen’s moral sentiments and actions. Hence, the very identity of an acting citizen is not stable; rather it is undergoing constant change according to the situation. The identity is a contingent, though reflexive fabric and an expression of advocated value commitments through different performances, mirroring the aspects of the individual’s own life (ibid., 31).

The phenomenon of reflexive politics refers to an individualised politics that does not fit into the frameworks of old structural politics nor does it follow the logic or procedures of traditional political agenda setting. On the contrary, it seeks to respond to the limitations of collective political activity by turning the focus on the structural shift in the nature of participation (Micheletti 2003, 28). Subjective *do-it-yourself* politicisations generate different personal political homes for each actor, and politicised issues are motivated by personal interests and aims also reflecting modes of action. Politicised issues emerge from everyday life and the variety of them might cover the whole spectrum of human life that is related to the question of leading an ethical and fair life. Such issues consist of, for instance, human rights, political rights, political consumerism, animal rights, housing

and urban planning, sexual identities, environmental issues, health and so forth. (Beck 1995; della Porta & Diani 1999; Polleta & Jasper 2001, 285-6; Micheletti 2003; Dahlgren 2005, 154; Bernstein 2005, 54.) Real or alleged moral sentiments and ethical ethos are fuelling a force for taking action and motivation arises from personal agenda setting when political is understood as an answer to the question of “How should we live?”

The newly emerged political consumerism as a form of reflexive politics highlights the typical features of the transformation of the political. Political consumerism reflects a change in citizen initiated politics, in which people direct activity to fields that allow them to seek individual and spontaneous forms of political expression. (Micheletti 2003, 15, 24.) Evidently, the market sphere and consumption need to be conceived of as a tool and arena of politics, which citizens are willing to use in influencing politics. Political consumerism is often considered from a narrow point of departure that focuses on single shopping decisions. In a broader definition, political consumerism means civic activity that politicises market practices, corporate policies and market society. It displays numerous forms and manners of activity, such as performing global social justice criticism, human rights, sustainable development, animal rights, ecological lifestyles etc. (Micheletti et al. 2005, 258-259; Micheletti 2003, 15; see also Mosca in this volume). Also “one-target campaigns” highlight the politicisation of the market sphere and consumption, when a single corporation or market practice is attacked by intensive politicking (see Baringhorst; Häyhtiö & Rinne and Hintikka in this volume). Furthermore, it has to be noticed that political consumerism broadly includes different alternative modes of consumption, such as the open source movement, net piracy, the fair trade movement, dumpster diving, ethical banking and environmental labels etc.

A characteristic feature of the forms of reflexive political action is, due to its’ meshworked nature, that it is not very consistently organised and they do not follow the traditional patterns of collective mobilisation. Mobilisation resembles more closely action networking than institutional structuring, and it employs publicity or may even produce publicness autonomously by using the tools and channels of new information technology (Chadwick 2006, 119; Wright 2004,



91; Bennett 2004, 127-130). Also, a successful activity is news itself. Typical of these actionist networks is that they flourish for a short but intensive time period capitalising on the publicity in provocative ways trying to raise new conflict settings that strengthen the impression of a truly affective political actor (see Baringhorst; Gillan; Jordan; Vromen; Häyhtiö & Rinne; Rättälä and Hintikka in this volume). In fact, most issue-specific individually orientated political interventions differ both from the traditional social movements, as well as from the “new social movements” in respect of their agenda, aims, temporal duration, and lines of chosen activities (Crossley 2002, 4; Osterweil 2004, 499, 504). Their ability to attract new followers and active participants is to be understood in terms of their capability to efficiently permeate different public spheres. By this capability they are able to offer people shared definitions in regard to the social grievances. To some extent this constructed relationship between individual and collective action is conceptually exactly what could be labelled as ‘social’ or ‘socialisation’, and which constructs the sense of belonging in actions when individual agents are reflecting and swarming around the emerging issues. (Polletta & Jasper 2001, 295; Bernstein 2005, 50; McDonald 2006, 22-3.) Thus, it is no wonder that the activities often take the form of countercultural intervention utilising its’ styles and tactics (McDonald 2006, 35-6).

#### CITIZEN INITIATED INTERNET POLITICS EMERGING: OUTLINING THE THEMES

As a channel, the Internet is tolerant and produces repertoires of contention and challenging information. It connects a many voiced crowd to discuss certain issues bringing participants from various backgrounds together to share and contest their views. The multitude of people may unite into a meshworked collectivity or the opinions may polarise or diversify. Yet, as a political facilitator and meet-up place, the Internet has shown its’ potentiality. The horizontal participation and action culture, characteristic of the Net, is far more radically democratic than traditional vertical democratic governing. Open and free Web communication based on the premise that all participants are equal

changes the nature of political communication and deliberation. The persuasiveness of arguments is dependent on the quality of argumentation, not on the position or status of the participant. The lack of personal face-to-face communication underlines the significance of appealing argumentation. This feature is important when we think of its outcomes in regard to political action. The transformative change is crystallised particularly in net-politics, because it is used to mobilise supporters and gather coalitions. Communicative reflexivity could be considered as a vitalisation of personal political empowerment, where collectivities and communities might be constituted just by clicking the mouse.

The volume is divided into two parts. The chapters in the first part discuss issues dealing with civic net-empowerment in relation to public bodies, political institutions, governments, and e-participation. The chapters in part I introduce innovative and creative forms of reactive politics responding to social and political wrongs. The chapters in part II, on the other hand, deal with different modes of net-activities introducing proactive civic empowerment in its various guises. The chapters in part II focus especially on citizen initiated styles of action emerging on the Internet.

Part I begins with **Lorenzo Mosca's** chapter. He studies the Internet's contribution to political processes. In his analysis the Internet is viewed as a double-faced media that creates opportunities as well as poses new challenges for political actors, especially for civic associations. The focus in his chapter is twofold: it clarifies the role of Internet usage among the organisational activities, and analyses the leadership positions of different organisational sectors within the Italian Global Justice Movement. Mosca's chapter is built on both quantitative and qualitative research gathered from the participants in the demonstration on the Bolkenstein directive in Rome in 2005. Mosca provides an in-depth insight into relations among variables concerning the political use of the Internet and detailed information on the Internet use in the daily life of the organisations.

**Kevin Gillan's** chapter draws on qualitative data. The dataset comprises transcripts from over sixty interviews with anti-war activists carried out 2006-7, field notes from numerous observations of anti-war activity and documentary analysis of media sources and movement

produced literature. Even if ICTs have become nearly ubiquitous in campaign organisations, as Gillan's examples from the UK demonstrates, this by no means implies a homogeneous relationship between activists and technologies. When particular technologies employed by the activists are considered, we find highly uneven usage from group to group and individual to individual. Gillan argues that, in understanding the variable uptake of web applications, one key factor for consideration is the political perspectives of the actors involved. Particular uses, to which technologies are put is differentiated by a range of factors including campaign goals, organisational structures and strategies for change, and are analysed in Gillan's chapter.

In her chapter **Ariadne Vromen** explores the distinction between conventional and non-conventional forms of participation that challenges established relationships of contact between citizens and their parliamentary representatives. Her chapter is based on in-depth analysis on Australian internet-based organisation, GetUp.org. Vromen claims, in her chapter, that the Internet facilitates collective action by new communities of political actors, and also that existing interpretations of social movement action as distinct from interest group activities are questioned due to these new forms of well resourced, internet-based participation that disrupt established power relationships. Vromen's analysis includes interviews, site analysis, media analysis and survey data with participants, showing that GetUp has been successful in achieving its campaign outcomes and has managed to attract attention from non-internet media and institutionalised political actors.

**Francesco Molinari** provides in his chapter an insight into the implementation of ICTs in public institutions and its potential value to an increased (e-)participation in the political decision-making process. He critically explores the technological, social and institutional conditions enabling the current "best practices" of e-democracy to be turned into stable components of a participatory legislative process as well as citizen's involvement in the definition and evaluation of policy targets and initiatives. Three main paradoxes of collective action related to representativeness, accountability and scale are brought up as challenges that need to be further clarified, in order to ensure the execution of a quality legislative process, and the active engagement of individual citizens. Requirements for this do not only include the

establishment of mechanisms for the expression of a “separate judgement” by interested people with respect to their elected representatives, but also the settlement of conditions for a timely, informed and responsible judgement.

**Pauliina Lehtonen**’s chapter on civic activism explores the use of the Internet and especially the expansion of social media usage linked to the changes within communication practices. Her chapter addresses the theme of *citizen-orientated* and produced online space at local grass-roots level. Analysis of the web portal of Manse Square, that was designed to provide a forum for different aspects of civic action by voluntary citizens, focus on the communal and political impacts of an example of local civic participation through the Internet. By analysing civic action and its potential impacts for social learning, Lehtonen provides an insight into civic action from two viewpoints: 1) collective civic action as social participation which might lack direct affiliation to political aims, and 2) collective action as political participation that has been initiated in the Manse Square environment more rarely than communally oriented forms of participation. The chapter leans on research material that consists of theme interviews (conducted in 2004), a web survey (in 2003–2004) and data gathered by participatory action research methods.

In his chapter **Lauri Paltemaa** analyses the so called “dictator’s dilemma” between the need to import and apply new technology for economic development and upholding autocratic practises of an illiberal regime. Technologies related to the Internet are necessary for modern economic growth and development, but at the same time they serve as an information channel that is difficult to control by the authorities and therefore makes oppositional activities against authoritarian regimes more likely to occur and achieve success. Paltemaa discusses, in his chapter, how, under these contradictory predictions, one should assess the impact of the Internet on the political future of China. The crucial question, then, is what does the Chinese example tell us about the possible social and political roles of information technology? Is it but an “update of an authoritarian system to the digital age”, or is it a means that forces the system to liberalise eventually?

Part I ends with a chapter by **Davide Calenda** and **Albert Meijer**. They provide a large scale cross-national empirical analysis of university

students' Internet activities and perceptions related to online politics. Their study contributes to the understanding of changes brought by Internet politics and gives empirical evidence of how extensive the political use of the Internet is. The descriptive analysis is framed within an interpretation schema that includes data on national differences and student's trust of the Internet as a means of empowering political citizenship. Their analysis confirms that using the Internet for politics has become a "normal" practice for the students and although it has not yet beaten the mass media, the use of the Internet for public activities is widespread. In addition, the study reveals that students make an integrated use of media to inform themselves about politics and demonstrates the similarities in political online activities as well as perceptions of politics amongst young people.=

Part II begins with **Pertti Lappalainen's** chapter. He claims that experience is a basic element of political action. His chapter is built on John Dewey's concept of experience introducing the idea of political style and also distinguishing various ways for political actors to stand out from other actors. In his chapter, Lappalainen develops the notion of the "*politgenicity*" of action, and discusses public involvement, a style of political activity enabled by the Internet. Lappalainen treats public involvement as a "political behaviour" that is a distinct alternative to political action. On the other hand, in the chapter the Internet is perceived as a forum of opportunities for multiple political styles. Thus, it enables contingent action and new political activities as well as political behaviour which tries to commit citizens to the strategy of governing bodies.

**Tim Jordan's** chapter explores a number of related, activist forms of politics that could not have come about without the existence of a range of internet technologies. From these he draws general propositions for a tentative and complex view on the Internet and politics. Jordan outlines three figures of virtual politics, or 'hacktivism', which are; mass embodied online protest; internet infrastructure and information politics; and communicative practices and information control. Through these three figures of resistance, he provides an insight into the complexity of the situation whereby politics has collided with the Internet. When looking at the examples that Jordan offers in his chapter, the specificity of a politics that operates within social and

cultural norms that are dependent on Internet technologies, is that Internet politics is dependent on expertise and this expertise enables intervention into the infrastructure of the 'world'.

**Sigrid Baringhorst** describes in her chapter general characteristics of political consumerism looking at the politicisation of consumption as a new form of political participation. The Internet is discussed in her chapter in terms of an empowering tool for such activities by providing consumers efficient means for the collective production of knowledge that can be used to enhance the market power of consumers as well as their influence as civil society actors. The Internet allows many-to-many self-initiated communication and may strengthen network-based participatory politics. However, political consumerism is critically discussed in Baringhorst's chapter in terms of political legitimacy and accountability. Even though direct activism in horizontal networks has the advantage of a broader public participation, it may lack accountability towards a wider public. The high profile consumerist campaigns run the risk of being merely event politics, and the question of representation, which is a crucial question of liberal democracy, remains unsolved.

In their chapter **Tapio Häyhtiö** and **Jarmo Rinne** describe how the role of the Internet is becoming increasingly significant with regard to political participation and mobilisation. They claim that the Internet is a powerful tool in gathering coalitions and organising mobilisation. In their analysis they show, how the use of the Internet is transforming political styles, forms and organisational structuring of political activities and the temporal nature of such activities. Individually steered collective meshing creates an actionist network and brings the element of subjectivity into politics. On the Internet the temporal dimensions of past, present, and future may blur, because the Internet dislocates space from temporality allowing people to share the same virtual space without necessarily sharing a real-time co-presence. The co-presence might be temporally not-coincidental making the political action on the Net more fluid and contingent. Häyhtiö's and Rinne's analysis is based on the analysis of exceptionally intense Finnish net protest against gossip journalism right after the first Finnish victory in the Eurovision song contest in spring 2006.

**Kari Hintikka's** focus, in his chapter, is on the Nordic Internet piracy movement and its recent activism in Scandinavia. The activities of the piracy movement includes successful denial-of service-attacks against government and police www services in Sweden and the attempts to buy an island and to form a sovereign country for pirates. Hintikka examines how the *modus operandi* of some new social movements are changing from the traditional work-intensive to the network intensive model and how the Internet itself is becoming an identity megaplex where an individual can easily select and mix social and political offerings and act on their behalf. The Net piracy movement, Piratpartiet, is an example of a protest movement reacting proactively towards such issues as the copyright laws and digital privacy. According to Hintikka, the ongoing change from material and location-based production and distribution to the global and networked economy should not be considered merely hacktivism but as a signal of the deeper change both of a new repertoire and a political opportunity structure for new social and political movements.

In her chapter **Tiina Rättilä** studies the user-generated mode of political communication, namely the blogs. Rättilä argues that blogs are rich in communicative elements, both visually and rhetorically. Even the names of many blogs represent, or include a message through which bloggers try to "reveal the truth". By putting on a show bloggers are creating a performance as they simultaneously play with their narrated identities. Rättilä's analysis introduces *the performative perspective* on communication, is that in which the blogosphere is viewed as a public communicative process that is inclusive and open to all interested participants making the production of new political ideas and public initiatives possible. This approach allows different forms of expression accepting social and political diversity. As user-generated communication blogging is considered a horizontal social media-application that enables the DIY-approach in (political) communication. That leads us to a situation in which, quoting the author: "*Perhaps the best we can do is to say that democracy on the net is becoming increasingly creative, diverse, and messy*".

As a result of this volume the effects of the Internet on political civic empowerment can be analysed as follows. First, computer-mediated communication is a resource for the activity. The Internet has

modified movements and organisations. It has increased meshworking and made them more networked, fluid, and dispersed. Collective mobilisation and the opportunities for direct action are feasible for ordinary citizens. The Net also facilitates the construction and strengthening of collective identities and the dissemination of alternative information. Second, micro-public spheres of the Net are potential places for the usage of actionist power; the Net is an open space both for political judgements and opinions and for choosing political styles. On the Net, basically anybody can try to influence matters that are considered important. Third, the communication platforms on the Internet construct personalised connections, such as user identifications, bookmarks, link listings, archives, email lists, blogs etc., which may be latent connections of social networks for a long time, but in the unpredictable situations of Net politics they may become politically significant *nodes*. Fourth, the Internet as an experience-based space enables different learning processes through which individuals can improve their self-governance related for instance to technical skills, information retrieval and self-generated content and knowledge which are also crucial arts for practising spontaneous Net politics. Fifth, open publicness facilitates the making of comments and remarks by other Net users. In the Internet milieu the notion of public means that the message of a sender is in the public domain, that is, it is accessible to others, but still the message is not necessarily communal, i.e. it does not necessarily become a public issue.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This volume is based on the international research seminar “Politics on the Internet: New Forms and Media for Political Action” held in November 2006 at the University of Tampere. The inspiring richness and outstanding quality of many presentations given during that seminar gave us an impetus to collect an edited volume consisting of the very best papers of that seminar. We are indebted to all the participants of the seminar who made it such a thrilling and interesting experience. Especially those who answered our invitation to join this journey deserve very special thanks. It takes time and stamina to



further elaborate a good text and making it even better. We would like to express our gratitude to all contributors to this volume for making this product an in-depth study in the field of Internet politics.

Special recognition goes to two research projects, both funded by the Academy of Finland. The research seminar was the final event of the project ***On-line Discussions as Political Action*** 2003-2006 (led by docent Auli Keskinen). The other project, ***Political Participation and Modes of Democracy: Finland in a Comparative Perspective*** 2007-2010 (led by Professor Heikki Paloheimo), provided the facilities and covered the expenditures of the publishing process.

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